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CHAUCER'S CLASSICISM.

PERHAPS no two words, outside the realm of theology, are more fraught with associations of clash and contest, of wars and rumors of wars, than the words Romanticism and Classicism. Each has been used as a term of deep contempt and of reverent admiration, and even yet we find critics at variance as to their significance. One affirms that classicism is in the last analysis essentially romantic; another asserts that the two are at opposite poles of the literary world; and a third—the loveliest as the subtlest of literary appreciators—while pointing out the differences, hints, with one of his own peculiar touches, at the time when ‘in that House Beautiful which the creative minds of all generations . . . are always building together for the refreshment of the human spirit,’ all oppositions between the two shall cease.¹

Yet the names stand for two tendencies, whose divergence is, we may confidently say, as old as art,—as old as human nature itself, since in human nature it is based; tendencies of which the two Greek tragedians are surely not the earliest embodiment, as they are not the latest.

Freeing ourselves, then, from any associations of praise or blame attached to the terms, we find that one of them is comparatively easy to define. The critics—Pater, Brunetière, Sainte-Beuve—seem to unite in attributing to classicism the qualities of measure, poise, sanity; making it not so much any one quality as a certain relation between qualities. Thus Brunetière, who is by temperament best fitted to give the classic spirit its most sympathetic interpretation: ‘Ce qui constitue proprement un classique, c’est l’équilibre en lui de toutes les facultés qui concourent à la perfection de l’œuvre

¹ Pater: Postscript; *Appreciations*, p. 241.

d'art, une santé de l'intelligence, comme la santé du corps est l'équilibre des forces qui résiste à la mort. Un classique est classique parce que dans son œuvre toutes les facultés trouvent chacune son légitime emploi, — sans que l'imagination y prenne le pas sur la raison, sans que la logique y alourdisse l'essor de l'imagination, sans que le sentiment y empiète sur les droits du bon sens, sans que le bon sens y refroidisse la chaleur du sentiment, sans que le fond s'y laisse entrevoir dépouillé de ce qu'il doit emprunter d'autorité persuasive au charme de la forme, et sans que jamais enfin la forme y usurpe un intérêt qui ne doit s'attacher qu'au fond.'¹ But, it may be objected, this is not classicism merely, this is perfection! And, indeed, the writer's classic sympathies may have led him unconsciously from description into eulogy. Yet classicism must imply a kind of perfection, and the passage is set right if we qualify it by noting that it deals only with relative, not with absolute values, — that the question of greatness is not logically involved. The test would, for example, make Lanier's little sonnet, *The Harlequin of Dreams*, by virtue of its exquisite perfection, as truly classic as the *Ædipus King*.

Classicism, then, is easily known; but the romantic spirit is, like Euphron, elusive. It is difficult to define, except in terms of negation and exclusion. Yet, as we think of Rousseau and Hugo and Musset, of the youthful Schiller and Novalis, of Coleridge and Blake, we feel their kinship, despite their individual and national differences. The romanticists are always, though in varying degree, marked by *lack* of equilibrium, measure, poise; they stand for reaction against convention. But this is unfairly negative. Pater gives us the positive side: 'It is the addition of strangeness to beauty that constitutes the romantic character in art; and, the desire of beauty being a fixed element in every artistic organization, it is the addition of curiosity to this desire of beauty that constitutes the romantic temper.'²

¹ Brunetière: 'Classiques et Romantiques'; *Études Critiques*, III. pp. 302, 303.

² *Appreciations*, p. 248.

This seems the most far-reaching and psychologically adequate suggestion that we have found. For it implies much. Traced out with regard to the art-product, this curiosity, this emphasis of strangeness in beauty, leads, as Pater points out, to neglect of perfection in form, everything else being sacrificed to this one purpose, — leads, sometimes, to the sacrifice of beauty itself; hence we get the grotesque, the passionate, the horrible — one thinks instantly of Coleridge and Musset and Hugo. Traced out in its subjective aspects, this curiosity and emphasis of strangeness lead to introspection, the search after the hidden meaning of things, which sometimes finds new beauties, sometimes magnifies trifles into crises, and makes commonplaces momentous and fraught with significance; — gives us, in short, the mystical temperament in all degrees of sanity, according to the physical and spiritual organization. And this helps us to interpret such natures as Blake and Novalis, or Shelley in some of his phases.

But if the two tendencies, the classic and the romantic, are distinctly different, that is not to say that they may not be united in one individual. Brunetière admits that they may, only stipulating that they be not confounded; and Pater suggests that even Sophocles shows romantic traits, nay, that the highest art results from a fusion of the two temperaments. Nor does it mean that classicism is always good and romanticism always bad, or the reverse. If Pater is right, the two qualities — curiosity, dealing with matter, and sense of proportion, dealing with form — are both necessary and both excellent, while both may fail of excellence; the faults of romanticism being those of sentimentality, unpractical ineffectiveness, extravagance; the faults of classicism being those of commonplaceness and tame prettiness.

To which of the two groups, then, does Chaucer belong? We may judge him in two ways: by his temperament, that is, psychologically; or, more objectively, by his works in their æsthetic and historic values. The first way may prove the only fair one, at least if we accept Brunetière's decision that a classic cannot exist until the language has reached perfection, and has freed itself from foreign influences. For

neither of these conditions is fulfilled in Chaucer's time: the language was inchoate and transitional, and both language and people were strongly under French and Latin influence. Thus in Brunetière's somewhat narrow and rigid system Chaucer has no place; though, as the professed advocate of evolutionary theory in literature, Brunetière might admit a growth in the direction of classicism in Chaucer's spirit as it gradually freed itself from French and Italian influences, and made towards a more truly English ideal.

In thinking of Chaucer's writings, one trait occurs to us that might be considered, if not romantic, at least non-classic, that is, a lack of architectural proportion in them. It is not lack of form, for taken in detail they do show fine artistic modelling. But it is surely significant that of all his longer works not one is finished,—unless *Troilus and Criseyde* be called finished, because its story is told out. Moreover, all the structural value of this poem is of course due, not to Chaucer, but to Boccaccio, whose plans the English poet used throughout, while refining his psychology. Of the other poems it may be argued that their incompleteness was perhaps due to outside circumstances, and in the case of the *Canterbury Tales* this has special weight; but one can hardly suppose that the most propitious conditions would have made, for instance, the *House of Fame* an organically unified creation; its superficial resemblances to Dante's poem make the differences all the more striking. And even in his ripest work—perhaps most of all there, because of its very ripeness—do we not feel that he had not within him an impelling and informing sense for the architectonics of his art? Yet one may hesitate before saying that this means anything for our purpose. If Chaucer had a fine sense of form and proportion in detail, but not, as it were, in the large, this may be only one way of saying that he was, when all is said, second-rate; it may mean, not that he was not a classicist, but that he was not a classicist of the first rank.

More indicative is the lack in his works of any signs of such reaction from earlier conventions as could be called

romantic. His common sense saved him, to be sure, from the vapid prosing of his predecessors, but this is the reaction of common sense purely, the check by which the self-conscious humorist saves himself in time from becoming dull; and it was compatible in him with much conformity—the conformity that shows itself, to take a trifle as illustration, in his retention of the senseless and tiresome asseverations in use in his time. Compare him with Dante, who, a century earlier, had not been prevented by his worship of Virgil from striking out for himself into an entirely new form, in a wholly new spirit, and the difference becomes at once apparent.

When we turn from the form to the content of the poems, a first impulse might be to class them, without question, as romantic. What are his stories about? Knights and ladies, adventure by land and sea, the very subject-matter which French and German romanticists turned to when they sought refuge from the garish present in the dim light of the Middle Ages, when they followed the call—

Noch einmal sattelt mir den Hippogryfen, ihr Musen,
Zum Ritt ins alte romantische Land!

But we must note that what is romantic to us may not—probably did not—seem so to Chaucer. If it is, perhaps, putting it too strongly to say that a knight and squire were to him as much a commonplace as to us a business man and his clerk, we may at least be sure that the terms had no such vague charm then as now. But what of *Troilus and Criseyde*? Was its subject-matter not practically as remote from him as from us? In a way, yes; but in a way, no. For the poets of Chaucer's day, instead of feeling the mystery and dim suggestiveness of the past, drew the past to them, into the light of their own times, and made it commonplace. And it is significant that the illuminated margins of the old manuscripts pictured the Trojan heroes in the full panoply of a mediæval knight, and drew Hector as carried to his grave by tonsured monks. There is in the *Troilus* no suggestion that Chaucer felt in his subject the fascination of

antiquity, the fascination such as, for instance, Pater must have felt in the times of Aurelius Antoninus, and whose glamour rests over his wonderful romance.

The truth is that, after all, the question is not one of remoteness or nearness in subject-matter; this is comparatively external, as Pater¹ recognizes, when he calls Scott, who turned to the past, less romantic than Emily Brontë, who took the seemingly commonplace world about her and touched it into strangeness. The vital question is as to the poet's attitude towards his material; and thus we find ourselves at last forced into the psychological treatment. Is Chaucer's temper of mind classic or romantic? If he had been born in the eighteenth century, would he have been more akin to Addison or to the forerunners of the later romantic reaction?

Two expressions, used by two critics temperamentally as far asunder as the poles, may indicate the answer. Arnold² speaks of the 'shrewdness' of Chaucer; Swinburne³ of his 'composed and comfortable genius.' Neither expression professes to be adequate, and, especially with Arnold's, it is somewhat unfair to wrench them from their context; but, without pressing them too far, we feel their force. We feel, too, that they are expressions which might be applied to some among the classicists, but never to a romanticist, *qua* romanticist. And to Chaucer they apply very well—to the keen, reflective, perhaps slightly melancholy, artistic man of the world, with a relish for the humor and the irony of life, but no sensitiveness to what Novalis would have called its veiled secrets. Whether he dealt with the remote days of Troy town, or with his own English country-people, he gave to all the stamp of his sanely rational spirit, which was never oppressed by a sense of the mystery of things, nor overpowered by a divine curiosity to fathom this mystery. Allowing that there might still be

Wel more thing then men han seen with yë,⁴

¹ *Appreciations*, pp. 244, 245.

² 'The Study of Poetry'; *Essays in Criticism*, 2d series, p. 33.

³ *Miscellanies*, p. 3.

⁴ Prologue, *The Legend of Good Women*, l. 11.

the poet yet summed up his practical philosophy in the words—one may picture the quiet smile about his eyes as he wrote :

A thousand tymes have I herd men telle,
That ther is joye in heven, and peyne in helle ;
And I acorde wel that hit is so ;
But natheles, yit wot I wel also,
That ther nis noon dwelling in this contree,
That either hath in heven or helle y-be.¹

If he had lived in the days of romanticism he might have been outwardly tinged by it, for he was sensitive and receptive,—but a true romanticist he could hardly have been ; while among his predecessors he was rather akin to Boccaccio, whom he imitated, than to Dante, whose words, indeed, he borrowed, but whose mystical, romantic spirit he can never have caught or felt.

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¹ Prologue, *The Legend of Good Women*, Text B, ll. 1-6.